

On a Condition on Occurrences of Prepositional
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On a Condition on Occurrences of Prepositional Phrases as Subjects

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This research deals with prepositional subject constructions (henceforth, PSCs), which are exemplified by the following:

(1) a. Under the bed is a cozy place to hide. (Nishihara (2005:221))

b. During the vacation may be convenient (Quirk et al. (1985:658))

Jaworska (1986) points out an interesting contrast, which shows that there is a condition on the predicates in PSCs.

(2) a. Under the chair attracted the cat's attention.

b. * Under the chair pleased the cat.

(Jaworska (1986:357))

In order to explain this difference, we propose that a PSC is a predication sentence, where the properties of the prepositional subject are expressed by the rest of the sentence. Accordingly, the predicate in a PSC is typically a copula, as seen in (1). Based on the semantic characteristic of PSCs, we can explain the difference between (2a) and (2b) by assuming that (2a) is a predication sentence, whereas (2b) is not. This assumption is borne out by observing lexical meanings of *attract* in (2a) and *please* in (2b), as shown below:

(3) a. attract

If something attracts people or animals, it has features that cause to them to come to it. (COBUILD⁴)

b. please

If someone or something pleases you, they make you feel happy and satisfied. (OALD)

According to the definition in (3a), (2a) means that the cat paid attention to the place *under the bed* due to its features or properties. That is, it is under the bed that causes the cat to pay attention to it, and the predicate in (2a) describes the attributes of the subject. Thus, (2a) is a predication sentence. By contrast, the verb *please* does not have the meaning that refers to the features of subjects. It follows that (2b) cannot be interpreted that the predicate expresses the properties of the subject, and is not a predication sentence. Based on this observation, our proposal can properly explain the difference in (2) suggested by Jaworska (1986).

Our analysis that PSCs are predication sentences predicts, and is justified by, several facts. First, without elements which describe the properties of the subject, PSCs are unacceptable. Consider the following examples:

(4) a. From Iowa City to Atlanta is a bad route.

b. ??From Iowa City to Atlanta is a route.

The only difference between the two is the existence/absence of the word *bad*. This word functions as expressing an attribute of the subject *from Iowa City to Atlanta*. The absence of the word in (4b) means that it is not a predication sentence, and this causes it to be awkward as a PSC. In fact, (4b) is semantically natural when it is interpreted as an existential sentence. That is, the meaning of (4b) is that there is a route between Iowa City and Atlanta.

Second, an unacceptable PSC can be improved when included in the discourse in which the attributes of the prepositional subject are already established as a topic.

(5) a. * Under the bed pleased the cat (two weeks ago).

b. John: I think under the bed is a favorite place for cats. But strangely enough your cat does not like the place.

Mary: Really? Under the bed pleased my cat two weeks ago.

In (5b), John describes the place *under the bed* as a favorite one for the cats. By his statement, this property of the place is eligible to be the topic. This discourse effect that highlights the property as the topic of the conversation enables us to interpret Mary's underlined utterance as stating the characteristic of the subject at a moment in the past. By contrast, (5a), which is not embedded in any discourse, expresses an event. Our proposal can explain the difference in acceptability between (5a) and Mary's underlined utterance in (5b).

The final evidence is exemplified by the following:

(6) a. * After dinner made me sleepy.

b. After dinner has always made me sleepy.

c. After dinner makes me sleepy these days.

d. After dinner used to make me sleepy.

While (6a) expresses an event that the time *after dinner* caused, (6b-d) express a set of events that it does/did in a certain period of time. That is, in (6b-d), the expressions *always*, *used to*, and *these days* cause us to interpret the sentences as habitual ones. Habitual sentences describe events that occur with regularity. This regularity leads us to interpret the time *after dinner* as having the features to cause the events. Due to this reading, in contrast to (6a), (6b-d) focus on the features of the prepositional subject. The impeccability of (6b-d) reflects this fact.

In this research, we have shown that a PSC is a predication sentence, and the rest of the sentence except for the prepositional subject expresses the properties of it. One major consequence of our proposal is that even in the cases where a PSC is not acceptable, some factors that enable us to reinterpret it as a predication sentence contribute to the improvement of its unacceptability.